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ADDITIONAL DISCOURSES

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GROUND, CREDIBILITY,

AND

T R U T H

OF THE

CHRISTIAN RELIGION:



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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

ON THE

PROGRESS OF

THE

RELIGION

OF THE

CHRISTIAN



BY

THE

COMMISSIONERS

OF THE

RELIGION

 SERMON I.

JOHN iii. 2.

*We know that thou art a teacher come
from God.*

THIS is said to our Saviour by Nicodemus, an intelligent and candid ob-
server of his ministry. With equal, SERMON
I.
with superior conviction, may not we
repeat the same acknowledgment? Nicodemus was struck with the irresistible
force of the miracles presented to his
view; we have, besides the ample testi-
mony of these, an additional confirma-
tion of divinity in the doctrine itself
completely laid together, and the cir-
cumstances

SERMON
 I. } cumstances attending it. Let us then,
 } extending, in an accommodated sense,
 the import of the text, consider the excellency of the gospel of Christ: 1st, in its contents; and 2dly, in its propagation; in which double view we shall find it highly perfective of human nature, and stamped with the clearest characters of divinity.

I. Respecting the contents, should a previous question arise, as to the genuineness of these scriptures, or the authenticity of the word delivered in them: it may reasonably be asked in turn, on what ground such facts can be doubted. Were not the penmen of them eye-witnesses of his actions, and ear-witnesses of his discourses? In every sect we believe the founder's professed records of doctrine and institution to be his own; and it is madness to suppose the Christians to be servants of Christ, and subjects of his laws, yet making a law of their own which

which he did not make. No man ^{SERMON}
doubts, that the Koran is the law of Mo- ^{I.}
hammed, or that the Old Testament
contains the religion of the Jews: and
the authority of the scriptures of the
New Testament is still farther proved by
all the arguments adducible in support
of the religion professed by the Christian
world; for all the arguments persuasive
to that religion are intended solely to
prove that which is held forth in those
books. It may be added, that these having
been for seventeen hundred years received
absolutely by all Christian assemblies; who-
ever shall be now hardy enough to ques-
tion their authenticity, must produce his
reasons for it: and powerful they must be,
to dislodge the disciples of Christ from
that groundwork which undisturbed pos-
session hath hitherto given them. That
this cannot happen, is tolerably certain;
because they have a long, immemorial,
universal tradition, that these books were
written in those times by the men
whose names they bear; that they were

SERMON
I. accepted by all the churches on the earliest publication of them, except some few of the smaller and later epistles, which were received first by some only, but at length consented to by all; that they were acknowledged in the age of their production, and by the age immediately ensuing, for genuine; had their authority published, their words cited, and appeals made to them in all questions of religious controversy; on the plain ground of conviction, that they were the genuine productions of their professed authors, and that the authors of them wrote nothing but what they competently knew: so that they could not be deceived themselves; and a suggestion that they would deceive, or forge a falsehood, was never so much as plausibly pretended by any adversaries. That were a matter, which must have been grounded on facts, and declared by actions, or not at all: but the actions of these evangelical writers are found blameless.

The

The evangelical writers do further SERMON
 merit belief by their illustrious works ^{I.}
 and gifts, by miracles which commanded
 nature, by prophecies which events ve-
 rified, and lastly, by that, on which the
 world may not improperly rely, the
 wisdom, the providence, the goodness
 of God; each of which attributes seems
 to be concerned in the care, that the
 religion, which He so distinguished and
 proved by mighty and miraculous signs,
 should not be lost, nor any false writ-
 ings, instead of true, obtruded; in which
 case, without our fault, obedience to
 his will would become impossible.

This remark premised, and the autho-
 rity of the records thus in brief vindic-
 ated, let us proceed to survey their
 contents, or the characters of divinity
 legible in the doctrine which they deli-
 vered; and we shall find it, on the most
 superficial view, a doctrine perfective
 of human nature. Its lessons are, to
 love God, and to love one another; to

SERMON hurt no man, and to do good to every
I. man. It proposes the noblest, the highest,
and the completest pleasures of the world;
the joys of benevolence, the wealth of
beneficence, the ease of innocence, and
the comfort of tranquil spirits. All, that
God and nature intended, it allows: ex-
cesses injurious, superfluities unbeneficial
to nature, it restrains: and forbids, in
speech or actions, the base, the savage,
the diabolical gratification, of malice,
and revenge. It permits the pleasures
of sense, where they minister to health
or society, to the intercourse of families,
and to the honour of communities. It
teaches men to be faithful to their word,
that they may be secured in all their just
interests; and to assist others with kind
offices, that they may receive assistance
in return. It forbids to despoil or cir-
cumvent one another, that they may not
destroy and make each other unhappy;
and it commands obedience to legitimate
authority, that societies may not be ruined
by disorder and confusion. It cements
and

and compacts government, confirms all SERMON
good laws, and endeavours to diffuse I.
peace. It inculcates a religion, which
is life and spirit; not consisting in cere-
monies and amusive externals, but in the
services of the heart, as well as in the
real devotion of the hands, and the sin-
cere profession of the lips; that is, in good
words, and good works. It commands
us to do that in respect to God, which
is agreeable to his excellence; to wor-
ship him in the best manner, and with
a due reverence of his sovereignty. It
bids us to do that in respect to our
neighbour, by which he may be advan-
taged: it is the perfection of natural law,
adapted to natural exigencies, and pro-
motive of every natural end; not destroy-
ing reason, but improving it in many
points and condescending to it in all;
promising every thing which we ought to
desire, yet promising nothing but what it
can effect; proclaiming war against all
vices, and generally commanding every
virtue; enabling to mortify, without
diffi-

SERMON
 I. difficulty, those affections which reason durst scarcely reprehend, because she hath not adequate strength to conquer them; and teaching many virtues which reason herself never discovered, and when known could never sufficiently enforce. It is also a doctrine, in which nothing is superfluous or burdensome; nor yet any thing wanting by which mankind may attain happiness, or by which God may be glorified. And if wisdom, justice, and mercy, if simplicity, holiness, and purity, if meekness, contentment, and charity, be abstracts of God's attributes and rays of divinity, then that doctrine, in which all these excellencies shine so conspicuously, without the mixture of one dissimilar ingredient, must necessarily be from heaven.

Such briefly delineated is the Christian religion in its contents. How far this little sketch I have drawn of the doctrines of it accords with exact truth, it is with every Christian to determine; it requires no other proof, than a candid perusal of the gospel. How far these doctrines display

display its divinity, it is with human **SERMON**
reason to decide. **I.**

But the doctrine of Jesus Christ yields an additional proof of divine origin, it was secondly observed in its propagation; in its instruments, and its success, not less wonderful than its contents: as I proceed next to illustrate.

II. Whoever intends to effect a purpose, must have means of his own proportionate to it; without which he must fail: or else he must derive proportionate means from a superior power. Let us consider, then, with what instruments the holy Jesus sets out on his great enterprize of enlightening the world. Twelve men of poor birth and obscure situation, of mean occupations and contemptible quality, without erudition, without address, are sent amidst the learned and wise, to put a period to the rites of Moses, and the religion of the temple, of which the Jews were invete-

SERMON
I. inveterately and irritably tenacious; to dispute, not only against the Jewish doctors, but the most renowned sages of Greece; to counteract all the learning of Athens, to countermine all the oratory of Rome. The leader, dying by a cruel, ignominious death, left those twelve weak instruments to effect a work, for which they possessed not a single qualification. They were, low in birth, they were poor in circumstances, and so timid in disposition, that on their master's first apprehension, "they all forsook him and fled;" yet were these men appointed to usher into a newly-settled empire, which would be impatient of innovation, a change, which must destroy all the temples, or at least remove thence all their gods; a change against which all the zeal of the world, all the the passions, and all the specious pretences contrivable by invention, must arm in violent opposition; a change which introduced new laws, with a reversal of the old; a change which superseded,
among

among the Romans, that religion under SERMON
which their fathers long prospered, and I.
under which their state obtained so much
grandeur, for another religion, in appear-
ance simple and humble, meek and peace-
able, not indeed apt to do harm, but at
that era frequently exposing to harm its
votaries ; inculcating pacific forbearance,
untying, as it were, the military girdle
of the soldier, making, if generally re-
ceived, the pride of arms insignificant,
and *turning the warriors' swords into*
pruning books.

Nor was this a slight and easy change
from one religious foppery to another ; the
new one perhaps adding splendor to their
Pantheon by the introduction of new dei-
ties, and introducing pomp and parade, ac-
commodated to dazzle the eye, and capti-
vate the fancy. The object of substitution
was a religion contradicting the common
reasons of state, erecting a new judicature,
and in its consequences tending to spread
silence through the Roman courts by

SERMON preventing injuries, and thereby preclud-
I. ing private litigation: a religion at va-
 riance with many maxims of worldly
 policy; giving countenance to the poor,
 and consequence to the lowly, this too
 at a time when wealth was adored, am-
 bition esteemed magnanimity, and plea-
 sure courted as supreme good; and of-
 fering no peculiar blessing to the opulent
 or powerful, but by humiliating their
 dispositions: a religion, yet farther, not
 only altering the face of things, but
 piercing into the secrets of the soul; un-
 ravelling the intrigues of hearts, correct-
 ing all evil manners, and breaking vile
 habits into submission and caution.

Now that such a religion, preached at
 such a period, by such persons, should
 triumph over philosophical wisdom, over
 the arguments of the subtle, the ha-
 rangues of the eloquent, the dominion of
 princes, the imaginary interest of states,
 the inclinations of nature, the blindness of
 zeal, the habits of education, the force of
 custom, and the pleasures of sin; that is,
 over

over wit, authority, and money, over SERMON
establishments, empire, pertinacy, and ^{I.}
fame, which are all the influences in the
world capable of rendering such a scheme
impracticable; could not be by the per-
sonal powers of the instruments employ-
ed in the conduct of it, but by some
superadded assistance equal to the mighty
effect. That with all these disadvantages,
this religion, contrary to the general fate
of novelties, which, however profitable or
good, incur reproach, and seldom pre-
vail, unless they commence at a for-
tunate time, and with strong prejudices
in their favour, should flourish by pres-
sure, grow glorious by opposition, and
become less and less disputable by ob-
jections; must be resolved into a higher
cause than any visible one, or in other
words, into divine agency. Admit the
intervention of this agency, and the
whole difficulty, otherwise inexplicable,
vanishes. By this the Apostles were
completely taught the scriptures, and
instructed in languages; by this they
were

SERMON were made wise to direct souls, bold to
I. adventure, skilful to counsel, intelligent
to convince opponents, and powerful to
work miracles. Without learning, the
champions of the gospel could not have
confuted the learned world; God therefore
became their teacher: without ability,
they could not have withstood or broken
the powerful resistance they had to en-
counter; God therefore gave them ability:
without courage, they could not have suc-
cessfully contested against all the violence
of the Jews and Gentiles; God therefore
was their support and animated them with
fortitude: without great forecast and great
caution, they could not have avoided the
snares of crafty persecutors; God there-
fore gave them caution, and made them
provident.

And their success was answerable.
The fame of Jesus soon diffused itself.
His religion spread with incredible ra-
pidity over the face of the habitable
world. On the day of Pentecost, when
the gift of tongues was displayed, three
thousand

thousand souls were instantly converted to it. It filled immediately afterwards all Asia; it passed next to Europe; and then, at no remote period, to the farthest Africans. In spite of tortures, in defiance of terrors, amidst ten thousand obstacles, apparently insuperable, the promulgers of the Gospel perseveringly told their artless tale: whatever was favourable to them made the religion they preached grow; whatever was adverse to them still made the same religion grow. If they enjoyed peace, the religion was prosperous; if they suffered persecution, it was prosperous likewise. If Sovereigns countenanced them, the world came in, because Christians lived holily; if Sovereigns were incensed against them, the world came in, because Christians died resolutely: and not only the poor, but the dignified, not only the weak, but the wise, præfects, judges, pleaders, scholars, became their disciples. Now what rational account can be given of such success, without

SERMON the supposition of authority delegated,
I. and succour supplied from heaven?
Without a known commission thus supported, can common sense conceive that the agents themselves would engage in the undertaking.

The incitement of fame may perhaps be insinuated, but sure most inadmissibly: no trace of ostentation appearing in their actions, as there was no likelihood of ambition in their situation. Or if otherwise, if notwithstanding appearances and situation, they might anticipate and desire the distinction of fame; still, as an acquisition of their own efforts, it must in consequence be very uncertain: very unlikely indeed, on the supposition of imposture, which infamy would follow, with a probability proportionate to that of detection. Or, apart from such probability, the fame, if any acquired by them, must be consequently inconsiderable; and at the same time of little value to those who were estranged
from

from all ideas of it by education : who ^{SERMON} made no personal advantage of it in fact, ^{I.} who rejected it in pretension, and who constantly referred what they said or did to the glory of a leader in the ministry of God : a leader, whom the persons, they were then addressing, had put to an ignominious death. God knows, here was poor ground to build fame or reputation upon ; and, what was still worse, this poor ground, on supposition, rested on a falsehood too.

Fame then set aside much less probably could dignity or emolument be their object. They were innocent plain men ; who had no bad ends to serve, who could look for no advancement in this life from the project, who were told by their master to expect, not crowns and scepters, not possessions or favour, not power and ease ; but, after a voluntary renunciation of secular concerns for the purpose of strict attention on their ministry, poverty and prisons, hardship and

X 2

vexation,


SERMON
I. vexation, labour and persecution, scourging-
ings and exile, bonds and death : this severe doom too, for a reward not to be enjoyed in their earthly state, but in futurity ; on a day which they should never know, till it arrived ; and in consequence of a promise, for the accomplishment of which they were to rely solely on his veracity. To authenticate their mission still more credibly, they sealed their report of it with their blood, they gave their life for a testimony. And what satisfactory return can any person hope to obtain, if he resign his life for a lie ? Who shall make him recompence, or what should tempt him to commit such an action knowingly ; apprehending, as he must do, the infinite hazard, indeed the certainty, of divine vengeance awaiting to punish it.

Let us however suppose the great advocates, the first planters of Christianity, to combine in the support of its cause, against all the rules of common sense, without

without conviction; what shall we say SERMON
I.
of the conversions which they effected?

Can we suppose in these also the same influence of the same delusion? Can we imagine all the world, or so great a part of it, so many thinking beings of different ranks, abilities and tempers, to consent by chance to embrace such instructors, and adopt such changes for nothing, or in short, on any grounds less than certainty? If any accession of strength were still wanting to complete the argument, it occurs in the prophecies so exactly fulfilled in our Lord; and those of our Lord, afterwards fulfilled, and fulfilling every day.

You are now, I would hope, furnished with sufficient evidence, that the author of our religion was, “a Teacher come from God.” What remains, but that we bring home to attention what He taught; receive it with reverence, examine it with care, apply it with im-

SERMON provement, admit its authority in faith,
 and its regulation in practice; that we
may secure what it promises in the per-
fect bliss of an immortal life, through
him our Mediator, to whom, &c.

SER.

 SERMON II.

JOHN v. 36.

But I have a greater witness than that of John: for the works which the Father hath given me to finish, the same works that I do, bear witness of me, that the Father hath sent me.

OUR Saviour, in this chapter, de-
monstrates himself to be the Christ, the
Son of God, by four different testimo-
nies; by that of John the Baptist, by
that of Moses and the Scriptures, by
that of God the Father speaking from
Heaven, and by his own miracles. The

X 4

words,

SERMON words, which I have read to you, contain
II. the great commanding argument from miracles only. Though John the Baptist was a witness, deserving on many accounts the greatest credit, and the declaration of our Lord, that he had a greater witness, was not intended to supersede or weaken John's testimony; yet were his own works stronger means of conviction in two respects,

Ist. With respect to the Jews, who were accustomed to judge of the extraordinary vocation of their prophets by these credentials, and ready accordingly on every occasion to demand signs of those who pretended to a divine commission; amongst whom miracles had for some time ceased, amongst whom even the Baptist had wrought none, amongst whom therefore the display of this illustrious privilege by our Saviour might presumably leave no room for a doubt of his superior character.

IIldly.

Idly. Stronger and more irresistible SERMON
II.
evidence of a divine commission was displayed in the privilege itself. The attestation of a forerunner, however high in repute, was at best an external and human evidence; but miracles carried with them an internal proof of Divinity, or the sign of the Almighty in the exercise of such extraordinary power. Whence the obvious remark of Nicodemus, that “none could do the works which Jesus did, except God were with him.”

I have supposed, in what has been premised, that the works, to which our blessed Lord refers as his vouchers, are his miracles; though in truth the other performances of his ministry, his preaching, his services of mercy, his offices of piety, his sufferings and death, are all likewise “works which his Father gave him to finish.” But as some of these were not then accomplished, and none of them were so affectingly and satisfactorily

SERMON torily proofs of a divine mission, as his
 II. miracles; we may conclude, that by
 works in this place, his miracles alone
 are meant: which he often calls by
 that appellation, as in the 10th chapter
 of this Gospel. "*If I do not the works
 of my Father, believe me not; but if I do,
 though you believe not me, believe the works.*"
 And again, in the 15th chapter. "*If I
 had not done among them the works which
 none other man did, they had not had sin:*
 that is, the sin of infidelity: those divine
 works having been sufficient for their
 conviction; and, as they had not this
 effect, leaving them without excuse.

The expediency of this sort of proof
 was peculiarly adapted to the temper
 and expectations of the Jewish nation;
 it had been the ordinary distinction of
 preceding missionaries. "*The Jews re-*
quire a sign," saith St. Paul, "*and the*
Greeks seek after wisdom." These latter
 loved sophistical subtleties, and philoso-
 phical

phical reasonings. The former would SERMON
II.
be persuaded by nothing but prodigies and wonders, the astonishing effects of the extraordinary power of the Deity; which they often exacted as importunately, as unseasonably. “*If ye see not signs and wonders,*” saith Christ to them, “*ye will not believe.*” And it was a current opinion among them, that the Messiah would display in his manifestation many miracles; as appears, amongst other passages, from the reasonings of that people with one another. “*When Christ cometh,*” say they, “*will he do more miracles than this man hath done?*” It was proper therefore to accommodate himself to the genius of those to whom he was sent; and to shew them that they had, according to their own principles, a sufficient confirmation of his pretensions.

I may further add, it was the ordinary method of Divine Providence, well known
to

SERMON to the Jews, to ground in miracles, on
II. special and important exigents, the authority of those who were delegated to offices of so high importance. Thus it was, that the mission of Moses, and several subsequent prophets was authenticated: and since the Almighty was now about to establish the authority of a missionary infinitely superior to all his predecessors, it was reasonable to expect, that he would not do less in his favour, and in support of his character, than he had done for Moses and the other prophets.

Besides these circumstances, the contents of the revelation which our Saviour delivered to his followers, and that degree of faith with which it was to be embraced, required likewise that he should prove the truth of it by miracles. The doctrinal part was in several points what the mind of man could not reach by the investigation of reason; the moral part was so opposite to the prejudices, the passions,

passions, the prevailing dispositions of ^{SERMON} men, that nothing less than the clearest ^{II.} evidence, could procure for it a favourable reception: yet the whole was to be admitted, not with a doubtful acquiescence, as a probability only; but with full faith, with such a determined assurance, that even death was to be preferred to the denial of it: and men were laid under the obligation of practising, with this strength of faith, that perfection of morals, by the severest penalties. These are therefore further reasons why the great Prophet, who thus taught, should produce the most unexceptionable credentials of a divine embassy.

And not only the things he was to teach, but those also which he was to accomplish, made the exertion of a miraculous power necessary to support the authority with which he declared himself invested. He came to abolish the great Mosaic ritual; which, as it had been originally sanctioned by miracles, could

SERMON could not presumably be abolished with-
II. out them. He came also to destroy the
works of the great enemy of man-
kind; which he could not do, but by
works of greater power. He came to
verify the ancient prophecies concerning
himself; and would therefore have want-
ed one of the most illustrious signatures,
by which the prophets had pointed him
out, had he wrought no miracles.

So much for the expediency of mira-
cles to authenticate his mission: the
next question is, how our Saviour's mi-
racles answered this important purpose;
or in other words, how "the works that
he did, sufficiently and effectually bare
witness of him, that the Father had sent
him." For the illustration of this point,
it may be proper to define what a mi-
racle is; by which I understand a sen-
sible effect, exceeding the known powers
of nature. Now as we are utterly ig-
norant how far the powers of beings
good or bad in superior classes of intel-
ligence may extend; and therefore can-
not

not be certain but that some phenomena, SERMON II. which appear, and are really, to us miraculous, have resulted from their agency, which is indeed confirmed by several intimations of scripture; it follows, that miracles are not separately, and in themselves, proofs that the workers of them are the messengers of God. And as it is highly repugnant to all our natural notions of the divine goodness, to suppose that He can leave men, who sincerely desire to know and follow truth, destitute of the necessary means of discriminating it from falsehood; it follows, that there must be ever some discernable traits and adjuncts, which mark and manifest his interposition. And the characters, which distinguish true religion from deceptions of any and every kind, are, I conceive, illustrated by plain peculiarities in their nature, manner, or tendency.

We are it is confessed, ignorant how far the power of evil spirits may extend, but we know how far it does not extend;

SERMON
II.

tend ; we know that it is infinitely inferior to that of God. Upon this principle, reason accordingly concurs with scripture in appropriating some wonderful acts of a particular kind to God himself ; as the prediction of distant contingencies depending upon the wills of free agents, the unerring knowledge of human thoughts, and the revival of the dead. The manner also of some wonderful acts, or the peculiar circumstances with which they are wrought, constitute another proof of their immediate procedure from God. As when they are public for instance, performed openly before great numbers ; when they are instantaneous and complete ; and when the result of them is a notoriously permanent effect : these are, if not equally infallible marks of the finger of God, yet corroborating proofs amongst others, that they proceed from divine power ; that they are at least, true and real miracles, and not like many of those ascribed to magicians and pagans, the illusions of artifice, or the pretences of falsehood.

falshood.

SERMON

II.


The tendency of these wonderful acts, is likewise a test of their divinity. A miracle, that tends to no purpose, or to a bad one, is on that very account suspicious. If the all-wise and good God ever alter or suspend the established course of nature, it must be for some wise and good reason ; for some important end which could not otherwise be obtained. It must be immediately, or ultimately, for the removal of some pernicious and spreading errors, or the confirmation of some momentous truths, in order to make mankind wiser and better. When therefore we are convinced that miracles bear the characters above described, are also attended with the peculiarities and distinctions just mentioned, and that the ends, which in this enumeration of circumstantial evidence I have specified, are intended by them, we may be assured that they are from God ; most certainly not from wicked spirits, such efficiency being beyond their

Y power,

SERMON
II.

power, as it is also contrary to their nature to promote good.

Let us now briefly try the miracles of Christ, those declared vouchers, "that the Father had sent him," by the preceding characteristics,

And first, with respect to the extraordinary abilities displayed in the miracles of Christ, examine them, and they will appear far surpassing the power of any created being; such as God hath reserved to himself, or such as he alone can communicate. That our Saviour could foretell the contingencies of futurity, and that futurity verified his predictions, we find in the several instances, of the fall of Peter, the destruction of Jerusalem, his own resurrection, the descent of the Holy Ghost, the persecuted state of his immediate followers, and the success of his gospel. That he could see into the heart appears by his frequent mention, both to the Pharisees, and to his

his own disciples, of what they thought; SERMON
II.
and that he could animate the dead, is unquestionable from no less than four instances on record; that of the ruler's daughter, that of the widow of Nain's son, that of Lazarus, who had lain in the grave, till putrefaction must have ensued, and which is more wonderful still, his own resumption of life after death, evinced for forty days together by many infallible tokens to many unexceptionable judges.

The manner also, in which these and his other miracles were wrought, was such as added a strong corroborating argument to prove them both real and divine. They were not performed in secret, they were not performed before a few credulous or interested witnesses, a circumstance which might have left them liable to the suspicion of imposture; but openly, before a multitude of enemies, as well as friends, at the most public festivals, and in the most frequented

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SERMON

II.

frequented places of resort. They were performed also with the same sort of action with which the almighty God created the world; by a FIAT, by a bare word or intimation of his will, without gradual process, or visible means or instruments. In appeasing a violent tempest, he says only, *peace, be still*: immediately the obedient winds hearken to his voice, and the agitated sea subsides. In curing an inveterate leprosy, he says no more than, *I will, be thou clean*: and the leper is suddenly cleansed. No sooner does he say to the deaf and dumb man, *Ephphatha, be opened*; than his ears are opened, and the string of his tongue loosed. He restores also to life both the widow's son, and Lazarus, by saying, to the one, *arise*, to the other, *come forth*. Once or twice indeed, he employs natural means in his operations, but they were manifestly so ineffectual in their nature to the purposes for which they were employed, and designedly so; as conduced only to magnify the power of the

the performer : who in those acts com-
municated to certain forms of matter, by SERMON
II.
an efficiency nothing short of divine,
powers and qualities, which in its own
nature it did not possess. Add to the
whole this finishing circumstance, that
his miracles produced always a durable
and permanent effect. If the ears of the
deaf, or the eyes of the blind, are open-
ed ; they continue afterwards clearly
and perfectly to hear, or see. If the dead
are raised, they continue to perform all
the functions of life ; and remain incon-
testibly, standing witnesses to the reality
of what was done in their favour.

But lastly divine agency appears in the
miracles of Christ from their design and
tendency. They were held out for the
sanction and propagation of doctrines
and precepts most worthy of God, and
most beneficial to mankind ; to enlighten
and reform, to promote the interests of
piety and virtue. Now, as it is impos-
sible that God should favour a lie ; and

SERMON

II.

equally incredible; that any wicked or malevolent being should lend an aid to the confirmation of truth, or that he should strive to set up God's authority, only to pull down his own: it follows, that since the Christian system hath a plain tendency to advance the honour, and enforce the service of the true God, with the true good of mankind; the miracles wrought in attestation of it must have the great Sovereign of nature for their author; and not any inferior spirit, except with his concurrence, and by his delegation. Suitable to this conclusion is the answer of our blessed Lord to the absurd calumny of the pharisees, that he cast out devils through Beelzebub.

"Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation, and every city or house divided against itself cannot stand. If Satan cast out Satan he is divided against himself, how then shall his kingdom stand? But if I by the spirit of God cast out devils, then the kingdom of God is come unto you:"

i. e. the expected kingdom of the Messiah;

fiah ; and this amongst other arguments **SERMON**
demonstrates me the Messiah. **II.**

You have now laid before you, as amply as the time, and as briefly as the subject, would allow, the chief characters of distinction, which give credit and consequence to the miracles of Christ, as testimonies of his heavenly descent. And if, according to the representation I have offered, our religion has been thus established by mighty signs and wonders, which though not seen by us, have been handed down to us by vouchers of the best authority, who confirmed likewise what they vouched by many undoubted miracles, and sealed the important truth with their blood ; we have surely the greatest reason to stand fast in the faith which we avow, and to evidence by our own works the truth, or at least our sincerity in the profession, of it.

We are not taught to expect an unremitting series of miracles for the conviction of unbelievers. Works of extraor-

SERMON
II. ordinary power, when occasion required it, have been performed, and to the abundant satisfaction of all well-meaning and unprejudiced enquirers ; who can resort to the authentic records of those facts, by which Christianity at first commanded attention, and which are sufficient to uphold it where it is, as well as to procure for it admission where it is not. We are at this day called to faith grounded on rational conviction ; and to works of piety, justice, and charity : these are works for every age of the church, for every professor of the Christian faith ; and more acceptable to God, as well as more beneficial to ourselves, than the greatest miracles would be, were we enabled to perform them. We have not that faith which works by wonders ; but we may have that which is much more valuable, the faith that works by love. We may have Christian charity, charity in the full extent of the word, the warm diffusive spirit of universal benevolence ; which is, in St. Paul's estimation,

mation, *more than to speak with the tongues* SERMON
of men and of angels, more than to prophecy, II.
and to understand all mysteries and all know-
ledge.

In short, our religion not only carries with it the fullest credentials of divinity in its evidences, but the strongest persuasives of reason in its precepts of conduct; it affords greater helps for the discharge of duty than any other institution, and comes farther recommended by the faithful promises of a happy immortality. Now the fairer grounds we have to believe it the gift of God, and the better it is in itself; the more must it upbraid us, the more must it enhance our guilt, if it do not make us better. If the heathens, who had only the light of nature to direct them; if the Jews, who had a much less perfect religion than ours, furnished, notwithstanding, many bright examples of eminent virtue; how will such examples shame and condemn us, whom the Son of God came purposely from heaven

SERMON II. heaven to warn and instruct: if under such powerful means of goodness our improvements be less than some of theirs, under the lessons of Socrates, or the dispensation of Moses. The great end of all the miracles wrought for the establishment of the gospel was, that men might be brought by faith to obedience, that by believing the truth of revelation, they might be led to live conformably to its moral dictates. They therefore frustrate the main purpose of God in their favour, and are inexcusably guilty, if they do not so regulate their conduct. "How shall they escape, if they neglect so great salvation; at first begun to be spoken of by the Lord, and confirmed afterwards by those who heard him: God also bearing them witness with signs and wonders, and with divers miracles and gifts of the Holy Ghost, according to his own will." God grant therefore that we may not frustrate this important purpose! but believe, and be saved through Jesus Christ our Lord, &c. &c.

SER -

SERMON III.

ACTS v. 42.

*And daily in the temple, and in every house,
they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus
Christ.*

IN my last discourse I considered the SERMON
III.
nature of miracles, as proper and satisfactory vouchers for a divine commission. Let us next examine the character, and note the zeal of those, to whom such commission was entrusted. When they were convened before the Jewish council, to be questioned concerning their faith, and warned with an authoritative interdict against the propagation of it; they were enjoined silence, but refused to obey men counteracting in contradiction to God.

SERMON
III.

God. They were beaten, but they persisted; they were threatened, but not deterred. They even *rejoiced, that they were counted worthy to suffer for the name of their Master*. What could actuate, what could sustain, this inflexibility of resolution? Not surely the spirit of deception. Mankind usually balance the chances of gain with those of loss; and, before they embark in an undertaking, satisfy themselves that it is feasible. If therefore the Apostles were deceivers, they must presumably have projected some advantage superior to their pains; otherwise they would have acted without common sense: and without that it would surpass every degree of credulity, to suppose them capable of deluding many of the wisest men in the world. But as the state of things was at that time, considering the treatment they received, what advantage could they propose; what had they to anticipate? Disappointment, alienation of friends, and all the evils which malevolence, armed with power, could inflict.

If

If therefore deceivers, they were deceivers **SERMON**
of a strange cast; contrivers of a project **II.**
without temptation, which exposed them
to inconveniences without an equivalent.
And as this is not credible, it remains to
account for their behaviour, from the
zeal of conscious honesty in the cause of
truth.

The contrary I know hath been insinuated; it hath been imagined, that they might find their account in imposture. But let us give this point a fair examination.

It must be allowed reasonable to think, that their religion could externally yield them in prospect no satisfactory recompence of profit or advantage; that they could not even live at ease in the profession of it, unless they could reconcile to it, among those to whom they preached it, the generality, or a majority, or at least a number sufficiently considerable, to secure them from ill-will. Let us
consider

SERMON consider therefore with candour the probability of their success to this amount.

III.


The world, at the time when Christianity appeared, was, in a religious view, divided into Jews and Gentiles, or Heathens. From the Jews the Apostles could expect nothing but the worst of usage; as their principles obliged them to speak in the best manner of that person, who had been treated by them as a malefactor, and whose crucifixion had been instrumentally procured by the Jewish rulers. Reflecting, therefore, upon the proceedings of the Jewish government, they could not but think that they should expose themselves to its utmost displeasure; especially were they to tell the people, as Peter did, that their governors were either so weak or so wicked, as to have plotted the death of a holy personage, sent by God to be their Saviour. Yet the Apostles spoke thus plainly, and in a public manner, as we find it in the records of their acts.

The

The chief priests and elders, the Jewish rulers, therefore must hence have perceived, that there was no way of supporting their own authority, but by silencing the Apostles; and the Apostles must perceive, that no exertion would be spared to stop the progress of their testimony. They could not but know also, that a people so tenaciously attached to the ceremonies of their religion, as by the general testimony of history the Jews were, would never endure any, who offered to depreciate the importance, or draw men off from the reverence, of those ceremonies. They might therefore reasonably fear the accomplishment of their master's prediction; *That those, who killed them, would think that they did God good service.*

SERMON
III.

Nor could these holy teachers expect better treatment in the quarters of Gentilism; especially if endeavouring to gain from it profelytes. They must foresee, that they should be hated for the profession

SERMON
III.  fion of a religion, differing from, and contradicting that protected by the laws, and sanctioned by antiquity; as they saw their own countrymen the Jews universally detested for the same reasons: and they might therefore conclude, that policy, as well as devotion, would induce every Heathen government to suppress, if possible, the opponents of an established idolatry; and to take away the lives or liberties of such opponents, as for endeavouring to carry off votaries from its worship might be judged by them disturbers of the state. It is plain therefore that, whilst this aversion lasted, there could be no presumptive hope of ease in the profession, much less of security in the propagation, of Christianity.

To get rid of this aversion therefore to the Apostles' principles and doctrine, which both the Jews and Gentiles we find must have been led to entertain, and the consequences with which it must have been attended; let us consider next
what

what chance there might be of conversions sufficiently speedy and numerous, SERMON
III.
to support them against it.

Now the great improbability of these, will easily appear on a fair view of what they taught, its nature, and its evidence: by its nature, I mean the maxims and demands of their religion; and by its evidence, the purport and process of their pretensions in these declared miracles; which, if supposititious, were as unlikely, as unentitled, to obtain credit.

Every one knows the difficulty of persuading numbers of men to renounce their religious opinions, however weak and indefensible; if they have for a long time been the professed opinions of their country. Every one knows too, that the difficulty will be greater, if the religion introduced to convert them, hold out no flattery to vice: and the difficulty still increases, when the persons to be converted are notoriously vicious. If this be a true

Z representa-

SERMON
III.

representation, and if it were the actual state of things when the Apostles set out in their ministry; it must be allowed, that supposing them to have common understanding, they could not naturally flatter themselves with the hope of many converts. That the doctrine, they preached, such as we have it in the Gospels, it's authentic records, does not indulge any irregular behaviour, how agreeable soever to passion and appetite; that it requires the practice of every thing deserving the name of virtue; cannot be denied by the most superficial reader. It allows no fantastic relaxation of its precepts, no reserve of venial corruption, no commutations for internal goodness by external performances. It proposes to no person any advantage, on any other condition, than that of improving in moral habits, with strict vigilance against every assault of temptation; than that of pleasing God by obedience, or propitiating him by penitence. With this purity, evident in the doctrine of the Apostles, taking into considera-

consideration at the same time the general state and condition of the Jews, whom we shall find so attached to the exterior of their religion, that they had almost lost the spirit of it; there will not appear the smallest hope of persuading them to part with their ceremonial observances, the only cloak by which they could cover, or the only oblation by which they could expiate, their wickedness, for a religion that required sincere and unaffected goodness.

SERMON
III.

We shall find again, as little hope of success among the Greeks and Romans; for all the historians who have left any account of that period, give such a character of the corruptions then commonly observable amongst them, as must excite the detestation of all, who retained the least remains of virtue. A religion, enjoining its followers to moderate their secular and sensual desires, would never suit the taste of such an age. The voluptuous, the ambitious, or the avaricious,

SERMON
III. } would never bear the restraints imposed
by the gospel, and the Apostles therefore,
could not expect to acquire on a sudden
many profelytes among people of such a
cast.

But it may be replied, that they trusted not solely to their doctrine, but to the impression of those astonishing facts which they ascribed to its author or first publisher. Might they not accordingly hope to make their way by forging these, by reporting fictitious miracles; considering especially the aptitude of mankind, or the lower ranks of mankind, to be affected by prodigies and marvellous relations?

To answer this suggestion, let us note fairly the circumstances, I. Of those who were to conduct the supposed forgery, II. Of those who were to be deluded by it.

I. The parties destined to conduct the supposed forgery were no less than twelve
in

in number. If they were to be employed as vouchers of a fact, we would not desire fewer; but if they were to be entrusted with a secret, they were too many. Madmen only would embark in such a design with such a number, and with a belief that a secret could be kept by so many, when any one of them might make his fortune by betraying it; and every one had reason to fear the utmost severities of persecution by keeping it. And should even one be tempted by promises or threats to disclose this secret, the design would be ruined beyond recovery, and all the hope of making converts extinguished. The apostles therefore must have been very weak men, instead of being, as the suggestion supposes them, very crafty men; had they built their ideas of success on such a foundation: especially if we consider their character, as well as their number. By the accounts which they give of themselves, and, as it is to their own disadvantage, who will dispute it; they were men, who,

SERMON
III.

SERMON

III.

before they had seen the crowning evidence of Christianity in the resurrection, had all forsaken their Master when the Jewish government seized him. Even he, who appeared to possess most courage, and most love for his Master, when he found him charged with capital guilt, from apprehension of suffering with him denied that he knew him. Can then those, who were not resolute enough to maintain a truth, be supposed fit instruments for the management of a fiction. Would they not in all probability confess the contrivance, as soon as their lives were in danger? Or may we not allowably conclude, that they never could have confided in one another, after so notorious a proof of unfaithfulness to their Leader?

Such were the circumstances of the Apostles. But to throw a probable air of illusion on the miracles of Christ and his Apostles, we are often told of the forged miracles of subsequent ages. The circumstances

circumstances however of those, who SERMON
III. counterfeited miracles in subsequent times, are entirely dissimilar. If they had the ill-luck to be discovered, they incurred no hazard of life or fortune. The Christian religion had, at the time those forged miracles were pretended, the support and encouragement of the civil government: hence, whatever was done in favour of it, might be deemed a pious zeal for the service of God and of Christ. There would be little reason to apprehend, that those who were concerned in the deception, whatever might be their numbers, should betray it; because no worldly motives could prompt the discovery: for, if the miracle succeeded, they might hope to be gainers by it. And if it was detected, they had nothing worse to fear, than the incidental reproach, that they had more zeal than understanding. The suspicion therefore raised from the counterfeit miracles of the sixth and following centuries, to discredit the miracles of our Saviour and

SERMON his Apostles, is ill-grounded and ill-
III. applied.

II. But more strikingly to evince conviction, let us remark farther, the dissimilarity of circumstances in the persons who were to believe the accounts reported by the Apostles, and the persons who were to believe the accounts reported by subsequent impostors.

The former, those who were to believe the Apostles, were enemies to the Christian religion : and, as such, would with a prejudiced eye behold, and, instead of befriending, be hardly brought to admit, the miracles, which were to give that religion support and reputation. The Apostles consequently, well knowing that nothing but the force of evidence could be successfully effective against the opposition threatening them, would have little reason to hope that their miracles, if counterfeit, should pass the examination of such prejudiced judges.

judges. Whereas the latter, those who SERMON
III.
in some particular ages of the church
boasted of miracles, affected to work
them among such as were friends to
Christianity; among such as might wish
to have it dignified in their times with
the same evidence, which had distin-
guished it in the times of the Apostles.
On such persons therefore, moulded and
tempered as it were for the purpose by
a favourable prepossession, there would
be little difficulty in imposing forged
miracles. It must be known that such
persons would wish, for the honour of
the religion to which they were at-
tached, that the pretended miracles were
true; and consequently, curiosity would
not be too minute in its scrutiny, lest a
favourite wish should be disappointed.

The Apostles would lie under ano-
ther disadvantage in the contrivance of
counterfeit miracles. They lived not
only in an age which admitted imme-
diate recourse to the scene of their story,
to


SERMON to extant memorials and accessible wit-

III.

nesses of what they asserted ; but also in a discerning and inquisitive age : which would not take things on trust, because well able to distinguish truth from fiction. When they first began to preach the gospel, most parts of learning were advanced to a culture and perfection as great as they had ever reached. The enquiries into nature, and its several powers, were carried to an extraordinary height in comparison with the attainments of some succeeding ages, and the world consequently was much better qualified for distinguishing the natural from the marvellous. They could not therefore, considering their education, hope to deceive the judgement of the world, at such an advantageous height of discernment. Or, had they been vain enough to hazard the attempt, they must have soon experienced the defeat and the disgrace of detection.

Perhaps, however, we may be told,
with the revived charge of an ancient
unbe-

unbeliever, that they began with the ^{SERMON} lower orders of men, and drew their ^{III.} disciples at first from those, who were remarkably ignorant. This is misrepresentation: but suffering it to pass for truth; can we conceive, that those of higher rank, the superiors or superintendants of communities, would sit idle, in arbitrary governments at least, and permit the allurements of converts from the established worship, had they been able to convict them of fraud? We find by Pliny's celebrated Letter to Trajan, that the great and powerful spared neither cost nor pains, neither promises or threats, to extort from the Christians a confession or avowal of imposture. If therefore the Apostles had possessed so much cunning as the allegation in question implies; they would have been discouraged from undertaking an imposture at a period so unseasonable. The proper season for imposture is the reign of ignorance, when any thing unusual may be magnified into a miracle; when persons are ready to believe any strange relation,

SERMON relation, and the more unlikely the re-
III.  lation, the more forward in believing it.
Such, is the seed-time of spurious miracles; at such a time were introduced those counterfeit miracles which deform the page of ecclesiastical history, and which, as ignorance increased, multiplied proportionably.

Though therefore latter ages might carry on with success a scheme of delusion, it does not follow that the Apostles could hope to do so: or because some of the successors of St. Peter might make the people believe, they wrought miracles when they did not; that St. Peter himself in his age, an illumined and critical era, could have made the world believe the resurrection, or other miraculous acts of Christ, had no such event in reality happened.

From this investigation mark then the consequences, which characterize the credulity of those affecters of incredulity,

lity, who believe every thing that is ^{SERMON} absurd in rejecting the truth of the gos- ^{III.} pel. They must believe that twelve persons united in propagating a falsehood; from whence, if it succeeded to their wish, they could derive no advantage, if it failed they had every thing to fear, and even the attempt was attended with ignominy and misery. Not one of them could be prevailed on to betray the secret, and discover the cheat, which successfully prospered in their hands: and every one of them lived miserably, and died miserably, in confirmation of this strange imposture. They sealed their confirmation of this lie with their blood in cruel and ignominious deaths; and launched into eternity, if it were a lie, with no possible expectation but to suffer for it hereafter. Apart from metaphysical subtleties, and ironical declamation, this is in brief the Deist's creed: and if such a creed as this will obtain the title to wisdom in this world, the title is easily earned: and the Lord have mercy
on

SERMON on his pretensions to happiness in the
III.
next.

Let us conclude then with a natural reflection in the emphatic words of an Apostle, "*How shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him!*" Supported as our holy religion stands by such vouchers, with such security against guile in the attestation of it, to explode its truths, to exclude its benefits, to brave its terrors, without at least a serious examination, is as inexcusable, as want of decency, want of candour, want of self-love can render affectation and levity. That this may not be our opprobrium, &c.

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S E R M O N I V .

2 COR. vi. 8.

By honour and dishonour, by evil report and good report, as deceivers, and yet true.

ST. Paul speaks this of himself and his SERMON
IV. coadjutors in the promulgation of the gospel. Truth was their boast, distrust was their lot. Without regard to the inconsistency of dishonesty in such a cause as they were engaged in, without the ends or arts of craft, against profession, against advantage, against ease, they were supposed capable of projecting and

SERMON and prosecuting an imposture. The fact
 IV. however, not the supposition, their real,
 not their reputed character, is our concern.
 We will make the assertion of the text
 a question; and before we admit the
 truth of their report, enquire into the
 credentials of their veracity.

I. The first is, that they report visible incidents, with the highest evidence of which they are capable, personal observation. This is the firmest foundation of assent to testimony: for though we conceive reason to suspect the truth of a narrative, whilst conveyed only in a general way by fame from uncertain tradition; yet when it comes to be attested by a sufficient number of credible persons, who profess themselves to have been eye-witnesses of it, it is held no longer reasonable to distrust the truth of it; especially in two cases: as first, if they vouch a matter which they might easily and clearly perceive; and secondly,
 if

if many of them exactly agree in the same declaration.

And first, as to the possible and easy perception of the matter in question, the person and actions of Jesus Christ; it was a common object of sense: and those, who were about him, had as great evidence that they conversed with him in the flesh, as we can have that we converse with one another. His miracles were all real, visible and permanent; no illusive operations on sight, or fancy. The cure of the man born blind was as notorious as his malady; the revival of the dead man at Nain was performed before much people; the call of Lazarus from the grave, in the presence of numerous spectators after a known interment for four days, left no room for imagination of artifice or error. And his own passion particularly was a plain object of sight, with public manifestation in the presence of his greatest adversaries. His death the very soldiers witnessed, by sparing him when

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they

SERMON they came to break his bones, *because*

IV. *they saw he was already dead.* At his resurrection, the stone was rolled away from the sepulchre, and no body found in it; though it was watched by centinels, and fear had dispersed his disciples. In the same manner, after his resurrection, he satisfied not only the distrustful Thomas, but the other doubting Apostles, with respect to the re-animation of his own crucified body; by permitting every sceptical trial, and accumulating every sensible proof of it. Now the more suspicious the Apostles themselves at first were, the greater is the evidence, how far they were from any design of abusing the world in their subsequent ministry; and what strong conviction there must have been in the thing itself, which was able to satisfy such scrupulous incredulity, such diffident and timid vouchers.

Secondly, If again many witnesses concur in the same declaration; disbelief is still less reasonable. Nothing can disparage more the truth of a testimony than

than the discordant representations of SERMON
IV.
such as were present at the same occurrences. But when all the witnesses fully agree not only in the substance, but in all material circumstances of the relation; what ground or reason can there be to suspect it of forgery or design: especially when the relators cannot be brought to vary in it from each other by terrors, pains, and tortures! And thus it is in the present case. We find no real dissent mentioned as to the birth, miracles, life, death, or resurrection of Jesus Christ. All the witnesses deliver the same attestation; though writing in different places, and on different occasions. No disavowal of the account; no alteration in any incident of it, from any dastardly view of displeasing, from any obsequious view of gratifying any persons, whom the exposure of it might interest or affect. And most of his miracles, not only his Apostles, but the people at large, and his very enemies, witnessed; whose posterity to this day will not deny, that he displayed

SERMON
IV. such illustrious performances. And in regard to his resurrection, had it not been demonstrated with the greatest certainty, it would be strange indeed that five hundred persons should all agree in the same tale, the greatest part of whom were living when the Apostle's appeal* was made to them; and that neither torture nor death could work in any one of them a disavowal of it.

A testimony thus given by eye-witnesses there can be no reason to reject; without some appearance of deficiency in their knowledge of the things reported, or some suspicion of their fidelity in reporting them. But, the witnesses of Christ were men intimately conversant with his actions, as well as his person; men who had been selected and trained for that very end, to attend the one, and announce the other. They had accordingly followed

* 1 Cor. xv. 6.

him wherever he went; were with him SERMON
IV.
in his solitudes and retirements, some of them in his transfiguration, others in his agony, in which they heard the expressions that came from his mouth; had indeed on all occasions sufficient opportunities and particular motives to know his acts, and note his virtues. Their means of information therefore are unsuspicious.

The fidelity of their report is not less so. For, they parted with all their worldly accommodations in the delivery of it. Whether they were opulent or not, or how much they parted with, is of little import: they had a subsistence, they found comforts, and they wanted not hopes; all which they freely and even cheerfully resigned, not for enjoyment, but for trouble; not for emolument, but for disgraces, persecutions, nay death itself, in the propagation of the gospel. Is not this conduct an ample proof of

SERMON
IV.

their veracity? It would have been folly to have deceived themselves in a matter of so great moment; it would have been folly to have lied for the sake of a religion, which tells them that liars will not receive its reward; it would have been folly to expose themselves to continual hazards for the sake of a fiction, and to be as they declared they were, "of all men most miserable, if the present life were the boundary of their prospects." There must have been therefore, to excite their alacrity, and to sustain the resolute industry of their undertaking, something more attractive in what they embraced, than what they resigned; and something more powerful in what they taught, than what they incurred; which could be only the conviction of truth.

Their fidelity is farther apparent from some striking characters of their testimony; as also from their peculiar manner of expressing themselves in the communication

munication of it, which bears the SERMON
IV.
strongest marks of impartiality.

They did not seek admiration for rare discoveries; they did not declare what was glorious or pleasing only, concealing what might be mocked and derided; they did not in general terms discourse of divine goodness and its qualities or designs, nor did they adapt themselves to the Heathen philosophers of their day by imitation, or competition in inventions or improvements of sublime or curious speculations; but they *preached Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block, to the Greeks foolishness*. They inculcated the vanity of human wisdom without his doctrine, and the gift of heavenly mercy communicated wholly and solely by his mediation; together with the necessity of a general faith in his mission for the purpose of a happy immortality: and they omitted not a single passage of his life or death, which might be deemed derogatory to that

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SERMON
IV.

high character he professed himself: a strong evidence, that they understood clearly, and believed fully, both the truth and the importance of their report.

An additional mark of impartiality grounds on the plainness and simplicity of speech, which characterises their representations. Imposture generally hides its deformity under a visor. The pretender to inspiration, as we find in the conductors of the antient oracles, wraps himself in mystery, or provides himself a subterfuge in the turnings and windings of ambiguity. The fabricator of a false story is obscure, or perplexed and inaccurate. The sophist affects subtlety; and in general those, who seek praise or esteem for fame or interest, have recourse either to the profound deduction and technical phrase, which is accounted science; or to ornamental flourishes, flattering insinuations, and measured cadences of periods, which we call eloquence: delighting to draw the gaze of wonder
by

by flights above ordinary apprehensions, **SERMON**
or feats beyond ordinary performances; **IV.**
and never thinking themselves better re-
compensed for their pains, than when
they are most admired and least under-
stood. But the heralds of Christ dis-
own and reject these trite and mean arti-
fices. In proclaiming facts, they heeded
not rhetoric; in giving a deposition, they
needed not elaborate expression; in con-
verting souls, for which purpose they
must apply intelligibly to capacities, and
work upon understandings, refinement
would have been suspicious, obscurity
absurd. They speak accordingly, not
like men who endeavour to obtain belief
of what they do not believe themselves:
but, as confident of their own honesty,
they declare themselves explicitly, grave-
ly, simply, under the impression of truth,
and with the candour becoming it; by
the authority of the divine spirit, and
with the artless dignity, characteristic
of it.

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SERMON
IV.

The next probable note of their veracity is their undaunted freedom of spirit. They did not give out one thing to the world, and another to their private disciples; but with great boldness declared their doctrine in the most public places, and before their greatest enemies. They neither feared the skill of the Jews in the law, nor the acuteness of the Greeks in sophistry. St. Paul preached Christ openly in the synagogues amongst his countrymen; nor less openly encountered he the Epicureans and Stoics among the Athenians. Had the Apostles been deceivers; in their account of Christ, they would not certainly have spoken with so much confidence concerning him, in the presence of those who had been his murderers; to whom we see they appealed for the notoriety of his acts and his resurrection: and this too, after betraying on a very urgent occasion a considerable degree of timidity; for on the apprehension of him, "*they all forsook him, and fled.*" Now, what could render adherents,

rents, once so fearful, afterwards so re-SERMON
solute ; but some more than ordinary IV.
influence, convincing and encouraging
them ?

Add lastly, as a further illustration of their testimony, that they deliver it in all its circumstances with the greatest particularity. On several examinations before several persons, they enumerate those circumstances without change or alteration ; agreeing uniformly in consistency with themselves, and harmony with each other. With respect to indifferent matters, we find them yielding and condescending ; but with respect to every thing which concerned their attestation, resolved and constant. Now, had the gospel been some cunningly contrived fancy ; it had been impossible, but that so many different persons in such different places, and under different conditions, would have varied in some material article of it ; or would have been wise enough to deliver it in general terms

SERMON terms only. They would not have in-
IV. sisted much on minute particulars, which
might have been easily, and would undoubtedly have been disproved; related, and repeated, as they must have been amongst so many jealous adversaries, both Jews and Heathens; who, with ample opportunities and strong incentives, from prejudice, credit, curiosity, and interest, to search into the complex and precise details laid before them, could not be supposed capable of suffering relations so strange to pass unnoticed, or, if false, to gain credit with the world, and remain unrefuted.

To set aside a testimony so distinguished, so supported, there can be admitted no possible counterforce; except the express contradiction of opponents, whose knowledge should appear more competent, and their fidelity more manifest; but of such satisfactory contradiction there is no trace, nor indeed on several accounts could there be.

As

As first, the Apostles witnessed the affirmative, which is in general more capable of proof than any negative can be. They must also have been more conversant with Christ, than any other persons; being chosen by him for the very purpose of being constantly with him. Who therefore so capable of knowing accurately all the particulars respecting him? And they must be more free from design than any counter-witness could at that time be: for they had not, as we have seen, any possible motive to actuate their testimony, except clear conviction.

But if any among the Jews of that period had asserted the contrary; the inducement actuating such conduct admits a natural explanation in their policy to uphold their repute with the people, as well as in their zeal to retain their traditions, or their avowed, though ungrounded, personal enmity to Christ.

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SERMON

IV.

There however exists no particular specific, counter-testimony of such kind. And as to the general opposition which the Scribes and Pharisees discovered to the testimony of the Apostles, it will bear little weight against it in the fair balance of reason. To what amount can be admitted the testimony of those, who possessed the high authority they did, and which they were likely to lose by the prevalence of the Christian faith; against that of the Apostles, who parted with all for the sake of that faith, and ventured an encounter with every risk and every difficulty, upon the truth of it?

I am led by the latter hint to observe yet farther, that none ever did so much in asserting the negative, as the Apostles did in establishing the affirmative. Had there been a timely discovery of any sufficient counter-evidence, we cannot conceive they would have persisted in announcing the person and actions of their Master with such continual hazards.

zards. If they were guilty of abusing the world; did any ever adventure a toil or pain to undeceive it? SERMON
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In brief recapitulation of what has been in the preceding discourses in general observed, let us finally see how wholly strange and unaccountable the attempt of Christ and his Apostles must have been, if not spirited and supported by truth. That men of low birth and education should conceive a design of new-modelling the religion of all nations, and reforming their manners by the laws of temperance, purity, and charity; that bad men should concur in an end so great and God-like, or good men in means so impious, as fraud and imposture; that men of craft or address should chuse for the hero of their story one who was chronicled as a malefactor, and who had been put to death by the consent of a whole people; one, too, that had abused their confidence, and misled them by false hopes into an endless train of miseries;

SERMON ries; all this is unnatural and incredible.

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The *zeal* with which they carried on this design, traversing seas and kingdoms, without rest and yet without repining, a zeal which could not be exceeded by the most righteous men in the most righteous cause; this, if not prompted by duty and a strong conviction of the truths they taught, is still more incredible. The excellency of the religion they taught, in its worship and morality far surpassing all human wisdom and philosophy, and the sole end of which is to make men honest, sincere and virtuous, if it be the work of ignorance and fraud, is equally strange and mysterious. The success of this design is yet a greater miracle. In this chain of wonders the event is the most miraculous part. The establishment of the gospel in an hundred different nations, its victory over Jews and Gentiles, over the power and policy of the wisest and greatest people, over the pride of learning, and the obstinacy of ignorance, over the

the prejudices of religion and those of SERMON
 sin and irreligion, is an event the most IV.
 wonderful of any in history. But this
 is a miracle which we see before our
 eyes: it is a miraculous fact, that must
 be ascribed to a miraculous cause.

Even granting the truth of the gospel
 miracles, the instruments in propagating it
 were so unequal to the work, that nothing
 but the power of God, accompanying
 and working with them, can account for
 its success. It was still a miracle, that
 it should prosper in their hands. But
 without either *truth* or *providence* to sup-
 port it, this success would be more than
 miraculous; it would be impossible.
 The testimony directly given to these
 miracles is strongly confirmed by the
 character of the witnesses; who, as far
 as appears even from the testimony of
 their enemies, were unblameable in their
 lives and manners, men of conscience
 and religion. Their writings breathe a
 spirit of piety, a zeal for God and good
 works, that is not equalled by any writ-
 B b ings

SERMON IV. inings the world can produce : they carry in them such marks of candour, truth and simplicity, as cannot be imitated: all which can never consist with the daring impiety of usurping the most sacred of all characters, and preaching a false religion to the world.

The numbers that engaged in this design, though dispersed in different regions, agreed perfectly in the same report. It was in the power of any of these, or of the accomplices that must be concerned with them, to defeat the whole by discovering the fraud : and it cannot be credited, on the supposition that it was a fraud, that not one should, by fear or interest, persuasion or torture, be prevailed on to discover it.

They put their testimony to the trial, by claiming a power of working miracles themselves : they displayed this power frequently and publicly ; and so submitted their truth to the eyes and the senses

of all about them. This pretence, if SERMON
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false, must have defeated the most probable and hopeful scheme: if true, it was no more than necessary to the difficulties of this. And the event was, great numbers were converted every day to the faith. But this conduct cannot, any more than the event, be reconciled to the character or supposition of imposture.

Lastly, they gave the highest proof that can be given to the veracity of their testimony, by going through the fiery trial of persecution in all its various forms of imprisonment, torture, and death. This began with the very beginning of Christianity: they saw it evidently before their eyes, and plainly devoted themselves from the first to a life of sufferings and affliction. They gave up ease and security, country, kindred, family and friends, to be treated every where with contempt and contumely, to conflict with poverty and want, to be persecuted from city to city, sentenced to imprisonment

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sonment and stripes, and at last to die by stoning, by the sword, or the cross! But this, in support of falsehood and wrong, is so contrary to human nature, that it is absolutely incredible.

By these circumstances, with this concentration of force, is the revelation of Christ, “confirmed unto us by them that heard him.” An evidence so cogent who will resist? A revelation so authoritative, who will disobey? Let thankfulness then be its tribute, obedience its effect; an obedience, like its intended benefit, unreserved. Neglect of it is unjust, partial observance of it inconsistent. If it be false, why should it influence at all; if true, why should it not influence universally? God grant, therefore, that his word in the gospel may lead with full efficacy in proper progression from truth to goodness, from goodness to happiness, a happiness perfect and immortal, through Jesus Christ, &c.

POSTSCRIPT.

WHEN we consider the spirit of licentiousness that is gone abroad, and that repugnancy to good order which seems to have pervaded almost every part of Europe; we are naturally led to seek for a cause equal to so general effect. Shall we attribute it to a general dissipation of manners, to an improvement in wisdom, or to folly's extended sway?

Dissipated enough, God knows, the age is: but what is it that has produced such general dissipation, as since the Christian era, hath been unknown in Christendom? Dissipation of manners may contribute to the object of complaint;

plaint; it may be an immediate, but it will not reach the effect, as an ultimate cause of it. For this we must go farther, and look deeper.

Nor is this our age glaringly charactered either with traits of superior wisdom, or prevailing folly. No new light hath beamed on us: nor is the old one obstructed by particular inroads of barbarism, or obscured by any marked clouds of passive ignorance. Yet on a further research may we not find, that the world assumes credit for more wisdom than it possesses? And with the world at large may it not fare as with an individual: who, whenever he presumes on being more wise than he really is, becomes through vanity more liable to be betrayed into acts of folly; and folly leads to vice?

“Decipimur specie recti.”

Under

Under the assumed port of philosophy, a set of men not many years ago, seem to have combined to emancipate the mind from narrow prejudices, and the gross ignorance of former ages. They affected a superiority in the regions of science; ambitious to give law, to establish the inflated consequence of their own opinions on the inferior world, and captivate the admiration of mankind. The characters I allude to were the philosopher of Ferney, D' Alembert, Rousseau, and some others of inferior name: to which knot of wisdom I will add, as head of the scientific band, the late King of Prussia. Of those D' Alembert was the only man, that had any pretensions to the title of a philosopher. And when he left the regions of philosophy for light excursions into the walks of metaphysics and divinity, he appeared in a character he had not the ballast of reading and science to support. As to Frederic, he was a man of great and pene-

trating mind; but desultory and vain: by turns a warrior, legislator, musician, philosopher, and divine. But the mind of man is not equal to excellence in every department in the vast range of universal science: and he was too much involved in the business and bustle of this world, to penetrate far into the concerns of the next. Voltaire had genius; but it was not a genius formed for argument, and urgent in the pursuit of truth. A buffoon in literature, he was a superficial philosopher, an unfaithful historian, an illiterate theologist. Rousseau had nothing to recommend him to admiration, but singularity and affectation: and those, it is a melancholy truth, the world is very apt to take on credit for sterling coin.

These and their satellites formed a constellation in the literary world, blazing in their own vain fancies, like meteors of recondite learning;

learning; and diffusing light upon a dark and ignorant age. Some thought to scold religion out of doors, others to laugh it out of countenance; thus endeavouring all in their respective powers, to untie the bonds of society, by relaxing the strongest sinew of civil government. I do not assert, that they had such objects in direct contemplation, that they employed their united exertions in a cool design, and deliberate plan for so spirited a purpose: but if, like Solomon's madman, they hurl their firebrands around them, it is but a poor amende to society, to say, "am I not in sport?"

From the spawn of that school sprung up Mirabeau, in point of learning contemptible, and destable in his principles, and his associates: men, who without just pretensions to the smallest degree of real learning, arrogantly boasted minds opened by philosophy, overturned

overturned the civil constitution of their devoted country, and have strained every nerve to eradicate from it every vestige of religion. And not content with the mischief done in their own country, they have dispatched emissaries to effect the same work of anarchy and confusion through every neighbouring state.*

But do reason and true philosophy teach this? Oh no: question a Newton, Locke,

* About twelve years ago, when at Paris, the ABBE GORDON, principal of the Scotch convent, observed to me, that their philosophs, and every man in Paris that can read is a philosoph, were once contented with the principles of deism, but they now took bolder flights. Materialism was then the fashionable doctrine of the day: and between atheism and materialism is so nice a barrier, that he who adopts the one, is very liable to be betrayed into the other. Something terrible, said the good Abbe, is working; God knows, what will be the event.

and Boyle; whose reach of mind, and indefatigable researches into nature placed them on the proudest summits of philosophy: and their works will tell you, they gloried in the name of Christians.

But I am not in this little essay supporting the truth of Christianity, but evincing the power and the value of it, even in regard to this world, by a direct appeal to facts; in proof that the miscreants of the day, in order to promote their diabolical designs against order and government, availed themselves of the labours of a profligate school, to eradicate from the human mind every trace of religion.

In this view the legislature will see it: and from temporal motives, if governors should arise so weak or wicked as to own or know no higher, will find every inducement with sacred reverence to respect, protect, and guard

*guard it. And every one, who has his own happiness, or the good of the community at heart, who is a friend to himself or to civil government, order, and peace, that is, every wise man, and worthy citizen, will by his own practice, and therein by the powerful influence of example, see abundant reason to promote so interesting a cause.**

My

* Monsieur Francois, Secretary to the Count de Chatelet, Ambassador to this Court, once observed to me, that he took frequent notice of the congregation, when they came out of the church, for he lived opposite to one; and could not help remarking, that they consisted chiefly of women. Now, said he, I do not pretend that we have more religion in our superior ranks of life in Paris, than you have in London: but we have certainly more appearance of it. Our men attend the public places of worship; in whatever estimation they may individually hold them: and the influence of the example is experienced among the lower orders of the community. The reverse of practice, and of consequences, is notorious among you: and to this cause I cannot help attributing the extreme profligacy of the lower classes in London, the murders, robberies, thefts, and slaughters at the gallows;

My duty and my station lead me to exert my best endeavours to manifest the truth of it, and to promote its interest, on other than temporal, on more solid, and very different ground. And indeed to evince the truth of it, is to promote its interest. For who can think on an eternity of happiness, without en-

gallows; nine times more frequent among you, than any other nation, of equal population, in Europe.

Respecting my own countrymen in London, I must confess my apprehensions, that my Friend's observation is supported with too much truth: how far it might have held good in Paris, I am not so competent to judge. But this late experience hath taught us, that a French mob, when the ties of religion are dissolved or slackened, yields not in barbarism and brutality to the most savage manners, that the most uncivilised state in Africa can display. And I cannot but entertain an idea, that this observation of Mr. Francais deserves to be extensively known; and express an earnest wish, that it might be sufficiently noticed by those whom it most concerns, those in the higher walks of life, whose example is of most weight and consequence, and have its proper influence with them.

devouring

devouring to obtain it? Who can think on endless misery, and see a beacon of salvation held out to guard him against it, and not avail himself of the friendly light?

As conducive to this purpose, to the course of sermons preached at the Bampton Lecture, on the ground and credibility of the Christian religion, I have added the four preceding discourses. The shortness of time between my engagement in that work and the execution of it, and the narrow limits prescribed by the founder of that lecture, precluded me in point of matter from doing that justice to the subject, which a subject of so much consequence claimed. I have since kept it in my eye; and in detached discourses have occasionally pursued it. They are written with as much plainness and perspicuity, as I could use: and if they contribute to fill up any chasms that may appear in the preceding discourses,

courses, if they tend in any degree farther to illustrate the general subject: if they should conciliate the belief of a wavering mind in one single individual; I shall be happy in the resumption of a subject, which cannot be too often urged, nor too forcibly impressed.

F I N I S.

confer, if they tend in any degree farther to
 illustrate the general subject: if they should
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T. M. S.



